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Fraternity Brothers or Founding Fathers? Defining the Role of Whiskey and the Communal Binge on
Native American Culture on the Frontier

by Chris Dineff

(English 1102)

The history of whiskey in the United States does not just shape American culture. In fact, its historical and political impacts stretch back to the nation's founding days. The importance of whiskey is seen as early as the 1791 Whiskey Tax, after which the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion became the well-known demonstration that opposed it. Through the rebellion, former colonists, now Americans, proved how much they valued whiskey, not only as a part of their culture but also as a commodity. The value in trade that whiskey played in American's interactions with the Native Americans has had far reaching consequences. Stereotypes about the drunken Native American have evolved over time as Native American's characteristics were initially blamed for their behavior under the influence. However, more modern conclusions attribute stress, inadequacy and loss of identity to blame for this continued alcohol dependence ("Alcoholism"). With the introduction of trade between Native Americans and colonists, whiskey and other spirits began to have a profound impact on the culture of the Native Americans, putting them on a crash course with the settlers pushing West, which ultimately lead to their demise.

The earliest reported appearance of alcohol in the New World was believed to be attributed to the French in the 1600s, yet the first reaction by the Native Americans towards it was more towards abstinence than indulgence. As Pierre Pastedechouen, a Jesuit, in the early 1630s reported, it seemed Native Americans believed the French, "dressed in iron, ate bones, and drank blood" ("Alcohol"). This negative conclusion that many Native Americans had was clearly not a favorable one towards French wine. It is then genuinely surprising that only a few decades later, in 1650, the British reported beginning an alcohol trade with Native Americans. After settling on the Atlantic Coast, colonists with entrepreneurial ambition began to import rum. The attractive nature of alcohol to Native Americans is notable in contrast to American views. Where it was common for colonists to recognize the taste of wine and spirits, one colonist noted that the Native Americans were more interested in rum than wine because it was cheaper and provided a quicker path to intoxication ("Alcohol").

This path to intoxication and inevitable damages were accelerated once colonists acknowledged new opportunities over the frontier. Without a true monetized economy in place, the new aptly named *frontiersman* needed a currency that was easier than corn or other sustainable commodities. In short, they settled on whiskey. Now it may seem that this was a dangerous proposition, which it was, but the new frontier did not have the infrastructure to support the use of crops to facilitate trade. As a result, whiskey's ability to be bottled, stored, and moved easily (not to mention its density in value) gave it wide appeal. To further appreciate whiskey's value as a monetary commodity, it should be noted that fur companies often used it to pay their trappers both white and Native American ("Alcoholism"). Introducing whiskey as a method of payment by an employer created an unmatched power dynamic where the fur companies could continually rely on their trappers each year because unlike cash, the trappers drank all of their compensation.

With the swift introduction of whiskey into the frontier culture, it quickly became apparent that there were negative impacts of widespread alcoholism. By the late 18th century, the town of Vincennes (now part of Indiana), was regularly tortured by drunk Native Americans who had traded their guns and supplies for alcohol. As Richard White explains in *The Middle Ground*, Native

Americans “reeled through the village armed only with their knives, which they used to stab and slash hogs, cattle, Americans, French, and (mostly) one another” (497). Citing a letter from William Henry Harrison (later the 9th President) to the Secretary of War in 1801, White states that Harrison estimated the traders sold six thousand gallons of liquor annually to Native American villages, where the populations were at most, six hundred warriors. Warriors and chiefs alike were murdered by others under the influence, and it appeared by the beginning of the 19th century that alcohol was threatening to wipe out both Native American culture and the Native Americans themselves. Recognizing this impending disaster, many Native American chiefs as well as the newly formed U.S. government attempted to halt the alcohol trade on the frontier. Those attempts failed, as other chiefs became dealers themselves. Preventing traders from selling alcohol to Native Americans proved difficult for the young government (498).

By 1808, President Thomas Jefferson realized that federal laws to ban the sale of liquor had failed (“Alcoholism”). Although he asked state and territorial governments to enact similar legislation, the request did not have much impact regulating the many independent traders throughout the frontier. As Ann Keating recognizes in *Rising up from Native American Country: the Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago*, John Kinzie, the infamous Chicago-based trader had a very lucrative business selling liquor to other traders who would bring the goods directly to local Native American villages (77). The Native American villages themselves knew that the U.S. government had banned the sale of alcohol, but still visited the U.S. owned general stores. Their prices were lower than typical traders, but traders, like Kinzie, had locations next to the government-owned stores, providing easy access to the liquor trade.

While national politicians attempted to curb the influence of alcohol on Native American-American relations, local politicians continued to use alcohol as a bargaining tool. Lewis Cass, the governor of Michigan Territory and Superintendent of Native American Affairs for the upper Great Lakes area, was deemed a hypocrite by Bernard C. Peters in his paper *Hypocrisy on the Great Lakes Frontier: The Use of Whiskey by the Michigan Department of Native American Affairs* (3). Peters notes that, “[a]lthough Cass publicly condemned the use of whiskey by traders, evidence indicates that he used whiskey to serve his ends, typically to induce Native Americans to cede their lands to the United States government.” During negotiations in the fall of 1819, Cass requested “considerations...congenial to their habits” while attempting to get the Saginaw band of Chippewa to agree to a cession of approximately six million acres (4). These “considerations” included over 660 gallons of whiskey for the Chippewa. Although the effects of alcohol were known, the ultimate goal of local and federal politicians was to expand and settle frontier using alcohol as a manipulative tool.

While alcohol was used as a tool against the Native Americans, one must grasp its effect on the average American at the time. At no other point in American history did Americans drink more liquor. A good excuse may be that they were celebrating two victories against the British Empire, but the sheer quantity of alcohol consumed per adult male daily was concerning. Between 1790 and 1840, the average adult male drank almost half a pint of hard liquor daily (“Alcoholism”). With this alarming statistic taken into account, one must evaluate the two methods of drinking that were common in American culture at the time: drams and communal binges. Drams were daily dosages of small quantities of distilled spirits, which did not lead to intoxication or drunkenness but did increase tolerance. Communal binges, on the other hand, were just that: binge drinking brought to the masses. Anytime three or more men got together to drink enormous quantities of alcohol with the purpose of getting drunk was considered a communal binge. This practice, not surprisingly, is still around today.

How then did these American attitudes towards alcohol shape the Native American’s drinking culture and culture overall? Taking into consideration the influence of widespread communal binging, popular amongst the frontiersmen, it becomes easy to recognize the correlation. In a few historical instances, communal binges affected American military decisions. An example is

a well-known military fiasco, known as Stillman's Run. In a complete misunderstanding, most military and professional minds at the time had exclaimed that the Sauk, led by Black Hawk, had crossed the Mississippi to make war, not to farm (Trask 150), as they actually intended. So, when Major Isaiah Stillman departed Dixon's Ferry on May 13, 1832, he led his local militia with the purpose of exterminating the Sauk (182). The story gets more colluded when one realizes how the involvement of alcohol affected the decisions made here. According to a private, Andrew Maxfield, troops moved towards the Sauk camp, abandoning heavy wagons loaded with whiskey. But before doing so, "one barrel of whiskey was...unheaded, and all...canteens filled" (183). It is extremely disturbing to think that Stillman's men were drunk during their first confrontation with Black Hawk and retreated after the first counter-attack due their incapacitation.

With this defeat and significant embarrassment for the Illinois militia and Governor Reynolds, it must not be forgotten that alcohol played an important role. To counter the commonplace stereotypes against Native Americans and their drinking habits, look no further than the undisciplined behavior of Major Stillman and his men. In their intoxicated provocation of a Sauk group, they failed to recognize that the Sauk had not made any hostile moves after crossing the Mississippi (Trask 182). The widespread impact of whiskey on the Native Americans is seen in debilitating results on individual lives and the culture in its entirety. When negotiating with the Native Americans, American politicians ignored moral consequences of using whiskey as a bargaining tool. Thus, a new group of people was created who were dependent on alcohol. Violence became common in places like Vincennes, and confrontations on the frontier were just other side-effects of the ever-so-popular communal binge. Based on the evidence presented, it is clear to see why the stereotype of the drunken Native American occurred in the first place and persists to this day. Whiskey was the primary contribution to the lack of advancement on the frontier, especially for Native Americans, as the monetary supply was spent as quickly as it was paid out.

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